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Transcending the Triad: Political Distrust, Local Cultural Norms and Reconceptualising the Drivers of Domestic Energy Poverty in the UK

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Abstract

This study contributes to the existing understandings of the drivers of domestic energy poverty by examining how locally-embedded cultural factors intersect with wider economic and political processes in constituting and perpetuating energy deprivation. Drawing upon qualitative evidence obtained from research in four case study sites in the United Kingdom, the chapter argues that energy poverty needs to be reconceptualised beyond simple triadic approaches to one that highlights the significance of the role that locally-embedded cultural norms play in driving experiences of energy poverty and in generating resistance to engagement with energy poverty alleviation initiatives.

Introduction

Energy poverty, defined as 'a measure of a household's ability to pay for energy services in the home to provide heating, lighting, cooking and appliance use to meet daily needs' (Boardman 2010, in Thomson et al 2016: 10), is a relatively understudied area within the field of policy-relevant research. The majority of policy-based research in the UK continues to conceptualise the causes of energy poverty as a combination of energy inefficient dwelling and appliances, low incomes, and high energy costs (Hills 2011, Sutton and Hill 2012, The Energy and Utilities Alliance 2016) – what can be termed the 'triad' approach. However, this approach results in the analysis of a complex situation in a way that aligns with policy categories, rather than one that conceptualises the experience from the perspectives of those affected. Furthermore, it has been argued that it oversimplifies the causes and experience of domestic energy deprivation (Bouzarovski and Petrova, 2015).

More recent scholarship has examined the dynamic experience of energy poverty, using this to highlight a much wider range of locally-contextualised contingencies that are implicated in causing the condition (Bouzarovski et al 2013, Middlemiss and Gillard 2015). This includes studies that highlight the role played by socio-cultural meanings and norms (Cupples et al 2007, Day and Hitchings 2011, Hards 2013, Hitchings et al 2013, Petrova et al 2013), but this continues to remain a relatively underexplored area. To address this limitation, this chapter draws upon in-depth qualitative research conducted within four communities in the UK, and argues that domestic energy poverty needs to be understood as being driven, in part, by locally-embedded cultural norms that intersect interrelate with material and political factors. The study makes the claim that local cultural and political geographies, in both the UK and in wider international settings, need to be acknowledged and considered in conceptualisations of energy poverty and in the development of energy poverty alleviation schemes. The study also lends support to theories of 'justice as recognition' by highlighting how patterns of geographically-situated socio-cultural stigma shape the experience and persistance energy poverty in specific localities (Snell et al 2015, Walker and Day ibid).

The empirical evidence presented in this chapter was collected between November 2014 and May 2015, from a study designed to explore personal experiences of fuel poverty across selected case study sites in the UK. Information was collected through: 1) a total of 13 personal oral histories of experiences of energy poverty, and 2) a total of 33 semi-structured

interviews. The study design was based upon the body of scholarship that values the agency of local actors and seeks to understand the experiences of energy poverty from the perspective of those affected (Bouzarovski et al 2013, Middlemiss and Gillard 2015).

Participants were recruited from urban and rural locations in Scotland and England. Urban Scottish participants came from the town of Fort William, in the West Highlands. With a population of 10,437 and a 73% employment rate amongst residents of working age, it is the second largest town in the Highlands of Scotland and has a similar employment rate to the 69% Scottish average (Smith et al 2014). The Scottish rural participants came from the villages of An-Aird, Banavie, Caol, Claggan, Corpach, Inverlochy and Lochyside that surround the town of Fort William. In Scotland, with the exception of five large cities, much of the geographic landscape continues to be characterised by towns similar in size to Fort William, with rural areas consisting of clusters of villages surrounding each town. While each small town and surrounding rural area is unique, the sites can be considered to be relatively representative of a typical small urban and rural area present in contemporary Scotland. In England, urban participants were selected from Slough, a large ethnically-diverse town in East Berkshire with a population of 140,200. 71% of residents were in employment, compared to a UK average of 72.7% (Bourner 2012). Rural English residents came from the villages of Blackheath, Bramley, Chilworth, Elstead, Milford, Peasmarsh and Shackleford that surround the market town of Godalming in Surrey. An area of wealth, the rural area is known for its high property prices and prosperity, however concerns have been raised in recent years that the needs of those within the area who do not enjoy the same level of living standards are going unnoticed because of the focus on the area's prosperity (Personal communication 2014, representative from Age UK, Surrey).

Participants were identified from their involvement in a larger project exploring local responses to weather-related hazards, and who had indicated that they had previously struggled to heat their homes or afford energy bills. 8 interviews and 3 oral history accounts were collected in Fort William, and 7 interviews and 4 oral histories from the surrounding rural area. 10 interviews and 3 oral histories were undertaken in Slough, with 8 interviews and 3 oral histories in the English rural site. Participants consisted of those of working age, referred to as 'younger adults' in chapter, and those aged 60 years and over, referred to as 'older adults'. Interview data were transcribed and analysed for words, phrases and nuances associated with stigma and cultural norms, including shame, discomfort, worry, distrust and isolation. Descriptions of changes to energy use and perceptions of shame over time where highlighted from the oral history data, before being organised and verified using N-Vivo software. All presented data has been anonymised.

Contextual background

While the vast majority of previous studies energy poverty focus on inefficient housing structures and equipment, high energy costs and low household incomes, in what is known as a 'triad' approach to analysing its causes (Thomson et al 2016: 3), others have taken a more expansive view by drawing attention to additional drivers. For example, as Boardman (2010) and Snell et al (2015) note, increases in disability rates, elderly people, the numbers of people living in private short-term rented accommodation, have contributed to increases in the numbers affected by energy poverty in the UK. Yet, despite recognition of the hardships that arise, the majority of policy-makers contend that energy poverty is distinct from general income poverty and is driven by 'poor energy efficiency and affordable energy carriers (Thomson et al 2016: 10, also see Boardman 2010, Hill 2012).

A more recent body of scholarship focuses upon subjective experiences of fuel poverty. These studies argue that traditional triadic approaches to energy poverty lack coherence in providing a holistic picture of the energy poverty experience (Bouzarovski et al 2013, 2014, Middlemiss and Gillard 2015). The ways in which households experience energy poverty do not always correspond to official definitions and several studies have provided a more situated representation by taking a ground-up approach (See Anderson et al 2012, Bouzarovski 2013, Brunner et al 2012, Gibbons and Singler 2008, Harrington et al 2006, Hitchings and Day 2011, Middlemiss and Gillard 2015). These studies stress that experiences of energy poverty represent a subjective experience within a particular situation at a particular moment in time. Other studies reveal how the amount of energy consumption deemed necessary in order to achieve a decent standard of living is materially and culturally conditioned (Boardman 2010, Bouzarovski et al 2013, Davis et al 2015, Day et al 2016, Hitchings and Day 2011, Walker et al 2016). These approaches also reveal an overlap between energy poverty and general income poverty (Bouzarovski et al 2014).

Middlemiss and Gillard (2015) developed an approach that suggests that the complexities of experiences could be conceptualised by adapting Spiers' (2000, in Middlemiss and Gillard 2015) framework of vulnerability to define specific risk factors associated with energy poverty. The approach asserts that a person becomes more or less vulnerable depending on the extent to which they are able to: 1) keep warm, 2) respond to challenges, 3) cope with change, 4) have power to challenge situations (Middlemiss and Gillard 2015: 147). Individuals become more or less vulnerable depending on the extent to which they can accommodate several identifiable challenges driven by external forces outwith their immediate control that impact upon their lives, including tenancy relations and ill-health (ibid: 149). This represents a much broader approach to the dynamic drivers of energy poverty than the classic 'triad' approach.

Bouzarovski and Petrova (2014, 2015: 9), similarly, acknowledge that established social practices – locally embedded customs, norms and conventions (Edgerton 2000 and Patterson 2000) – can play a role in shaping whether households can access required energy services. . These customs norms are not statically fixed, but can persist over time (Edgerton 2000). Yet, whilst the role of cultural factors in have begun to be acknowledged as an important contingency in the emergence of energy poverty, empirical studies of that examine such issues remain limited.

The few studies available that do examine this issue present some intriguing findings. Cupples et al (2007) focuses on how individual preferences for heating homes in New Zealand is tied to cultural identities ground upon colonial heritage, notions of masculinity and national identity. Day and Hitching (2011) explore how practices to keep warm during winter amongst older people in the UK are shaped by the stigma associated with older age. Meanwhile Hards (2013) explores how energy use in different areas of the world is shaped by socio-cultural ideas of status, and she also highlights the need for more comprehensive work to be undertaken to explore how status and stigma reflect and reinforce inequalities. Similarly, a study by Hitchings et al (2015) focusing on how local perceptions of cold discomfort during winter in Australia were affected by a cultural focus on the summer season, concluded that there is a need for greater engagement with local cultural geographies to effectively understand issues of domestic heat.

This study provides an in-depth qualitative investigation into how local cultural norms influence the experience and generation of energy poverty in the UK. It builds upon previous research by exploring how such norms intersect with other economic and political drivers.

Findings

The shame of being cold

Participants in all four case study sites described experiences of energy poverty as one of 'shame' and 'social isolation'. Participants explained that not having the means to heat their homes to the extent required to live a socially inclusive life was associated with negative self-perceptions of irresponsibility and concerns about being seen as a failure or morally corrupt by others. Although previous scholarship has suggested that energy poverty and income poverty are distinct (Thomson at et al 2016: 10, Hills, 2012), participants characterised social isolation as the hallmark of 'poverty' in general and did not make a distinction between income poverty and energy poverty. A total of 21 out of the 33 participants suggested that not being able to provide heating for oneself or one's household was something that they felt ashamed of. As a result, those affected often tried to conceal their hardship to avoid feeling embarrassed amongst their wider social network.

These actions were underpinned by cultural attitudes that placed significant emphasis on personal responsibility for avoiding financial hardship and for ensuring the comfort of family members. Furthermore, subtle differences were found in attitudes across the four case study sites. For example, in Fort William, participants explained that they took action to try to mask hardship by spending beyond their means to heat their homes when guests were arriving to avoid the shame associated with being seen to be financially struggling. One participant, a lady age 30, now employed as a Care Assistant for the elderly, but who had previously experienced several years of unemployment, explained how in the past she:

> 'Spent what little money [she] had on electricity to make the house warm and to have food in when I knew I was getting visitors. I couldn't afford to have the heating on all day, but I wanted to show everyone I was getting by and getting on as normal'

She then explained that her motivations for masking her hardship resulted from feelings of shame:

> 'It was like it was really embarrassing, so I'd be like wanting to show that it was okay so they wouldn't look down on me….. They probably wouldn't think as harsh as that, but just the thought that they might makes you not want to say anything.'

In Slough, participants emphasised that they tried to mask hardships because they felt a responsibility not to let others down because of 'a personal failing'. This was explained by a construction worker in his 30's, who was living with his partner and 3 children, who explained why he spent money on heating rather than bus fares for the week:

> 'I couldn't afford much and heating was a big part of that. But it was important to make sure that others were comfortable. I could have afforded the bus if I'd let the place go cold, but I didn't want people to stop coming

> round....I didn't want to feel like some sort of failure and putting them off coming round here by moaning all the time.'

Another participant - unemployed, but with a young family, also from Slough - also noted spending more on heating to avoid feelings of moral failings, stating:

> 'I was broke when they stopped my benefits those weeks. I had some money left and I thought keep the place warm so at least my kids are inside. If the house is too cold the kids won't want to stay in and I'm trying to keep them out of the streets. They don't need to get caught up in more fights with the neighbours. That gives them [the neighbours] an excuse to come round here and an excuse to think we're bad parents'.

In the rural villages surrounding Fort William in Scotland and in the rural town of Godalming in England, participants spoke about how long-standing negative attitudes towards debt led to self-imposed isolation through not having the means to heat their homes and the perceptions of shame that this incurred. While desires to isolate were evident in the urban areas, they were more pronounced in the rural areas due to concerns that in a smaller area their hardships would be more likely to be visible to other residents. This was particularly true for elderly residents who perceived both debt and poverty as a marker of personal failure. Two participants described how they isolated themselves within their cold homes out of concern that 'others would see them as weak'. In the Scottish rural context, participants described how attitudes transmitted from their parents about the equation of debt with irresponsibility directly led to feelings of shame and guilt that they had let their parents (or memories of their late parents) down by not being able to meet the high moral standards that they had been raised with. In the English rural context, people spoke more often about not wanting to be seen as 'a charity case' by the wider community rather than being concerned that they had let their family members down, but which nevertheless contributed to feelings of low self-worth.

In both the Scottish urban and rural contexts, some participants attributed the origins of these stigmas surrounding poverty to historic Protestant church teachings that emphasised hard-work as a marker of 'good moral character'. Others attributed the origins to particular localities, stating that these attitudes are more rigidly embedded in areas once dominated by the fishing industry and in working class communities, where the importance of being seen by others to be a good provider for one's family was emphasised as being a positive character trait. In contrast, areas once predominated by agriculture were viewed as being more 'forgiving' of hardship, where hardship was seen as less of a personal moral failing and more of an outcome of external circumstances. This was explained by an older participant now living in Fort William, but who had previously lived in various other locations in Scotland:

> 'I grew up in the country and we were all poor. If someone needed helped, folk helped. It was accepted that you'd struggle. There wasn't the judgement I saw when I moved to Aberdeen where it was your own hard luck and people, well their attitude was more it 'sort it out yourself' like it was your problem, your fault, you caused it. Here it's not as bad....I think it's to do with the history of the place... tolerance is sort of built-in with the way of farming'

In the English sites, the stigma surrounding poverty was associated with social class and notions that aspirations to improve social standing were positive character traits. Participants

spoke of how they learned these attitudes and ideas from their parents and grandparents, which they generally accepted without much questioning. This reveals that these ideas were deeply ingrained within the fabric of society and persistent over a long period of time, as described by an older male resident, who was previously employed as a Gardener:

> 'You're taught this through your life; to work hard, improve yourself and if you don't make money, get a good home, decent living, that's you, a failure. You get it as you grow up, 'You need to go to school, get a good job'....the world doesn't respect you if you don't make it. You're brought up to try to get to being middle class....you don't question when you hear it all the time. You try to live up to these standards and then feel bad when you can't.'

Deeply-embedded cultural norms also influenced views about acceptable levels of warmth. Again, these ideas varied across each locality, with the lowest standards reported in rural Scotland where minimum expectations were to be able to heat the main living area with a gas, electric, solid fuel or log fire and have enough electricity or gas to take one bath or shower per day and be able to cook meals. In Fort William, participants described an acceptable level of warmth as being warm enough for each member of the household to feel comfortable and with enough supply to be able to use technological, cooking and washing facilities as often as they needed. In both English sites, minimum standards were defined as being warm enough to avoid any negative health effects. In all sites however, not being able to meet the minimum expectations was viewed as shameful.

In addition to influencing energy consumption, locally-embedded cultural norms impacted upon the ways that participants could obtain help to avoid hardship associated with energy poverty. In all four sites, participants spoke of local expectations relating to the disclosure of personal matters, including health and finance, as influencing abilities to cope with the hardship. Again, these norms were similar in each case study site. In rural Scotland, participants described how matters relating to personal finances were generally not regarded as suitable topics for discussion outwith immediate circles of family and friends, as one 41 year old female participant explained:

> 'It's just seen as something not done. It's too personal. You'd be sharing too much. It'd be seen as bad manners'.

In the English sites, such restrictive views resonated more strongly with older residents, whereas younger residents in the urban Scottish and both the English sites expressed greater willingness to share this information beyond immediate social circles, but only when it was deemed absolutely necessary to do so, such as when the health of a member of the household, other than themselves, was at immediate risk, illustrated by a 25 year old male participant from Slough:

> 'It's not the sort of thing you'd want to hype about, but you gotta give information to get the help you need. You don't want to tell people you don't know that can't afford it, but if your Mum's ill and needs to be warm or if there's kids in the house, cold gets dangerous and you'd do it then.'

Furthermore, even in cases where it was deemed to be an appropriate, general rules applied for with whom this information could be shared with, such as more distant friends or

acquaintances who had personal experience of having been through similar hardships and could be trusted to keep the information confidential. Certain appropriate professionals, such as the family GP, were deemed more acceptable to share information with than a Social Worker or a teacher from their children's school. Information could be shared with personnel from the Job Centre or from local branches of the Department of Social Security Services only if it was absolutely necessary to disclose this information to secure an income. Participants over 60 years old in both urban sites expressed more reluctance to disclose this information to anyone they did not personally know than their younger counterparts.

The main reason that younger adults below the age of 60 gave for increased flexibility of disclosing financial information in the urban settings was that they had fewer strong close personal connections within their immediate community who they could turn to for help, as a result of having moved away from close friends and family in pursuit of employment. However, even for the younger adults, disclosures of hardship often resulted in entrenching feelings of shame and self-loathing, as described by one particular participant from the Scottish urban site:

> 'You feel like you are a failure. You hope others don't think that, but by speaking it, it's kind of like you're admitting it, when you shouldn't want to admit because it makes you look bad like you've got no standards...You don't want to say to your folks you've no money for heating so they think you can't cope moving away from them'.

Similar stories were echoed by participants from the English case study sites, with one subtle difference being that information could only be disclosed in such a way as to show that the person was taking personal responsibility for trying to improve their situation:

> 'You have to do it in a way that you're asking for help but not begging. You got to do it in a way that you are showing that you are serious about changing things for the better and not just trying to get money.'

These deeply-rooted local expectations about disclosing information help reproduce energy poverty, as they impact upon people's abilities and willingness to seek help from social networks and professional organisations to avoid the ill-health, discomfort and social isolation that results from not being able to heat their homes. In addition, if people are unwilling to directly disclose information about their hardships, this places greater emphasis on a person's social connections to notice the hardships of another via observation and to attend to the problem in ways that do not add to the person's sense of shame by asking invasive questions about personal circumstances. This also raises concern about how the energy needs of residents who are more socially isolated can be adequately met. Further, as the shame associated with experiencing inability to heat ones home results in self-imposed isolation or efforts to mask the true reality of one's situation by adjusting energy consumption behaviours and/or by getting into debt, the abilities of social contacts to become aware of the reality of the situation without asking directly becomes further impaired.

The relationship between cultural norms and wider processes of political and economic change in shaping experiences of energy poverty

These findings from the interviews were supplemented by additional information from the personal life histories collected during this study. These provide a holistic picture as to how

prevailing cultural norms intersect with changing economic and political geographies of place to drive local experiences of energy poverty.

Participants' recollections illustrated how changes to the market economy during the 1980s and 1990s resulted in changes to local industry, property prices and social attitudes, which affected community demographics, employment opportunities, housing arrangements and social relationships within communities (see Berry 2011, Clements et al 2008, Keating 2007, Mackenzie 2004, McCrone 2001 for further information about socio-economic and political change). In combination with the deregulation of the energy supply industry, these wider impacts led to changes in households' ability to access energy and to ameliorate hardships. While participants mentioned how the sale of social housing and the rise of private tenancy agreements presented increased difficulties in choosing energy suppliers and preferred payment methods, and in negotiating structural upgrades to building fabrics and household appliances, these were not seen on their own to contribute to their experiences of energy hardship. Instead, they were felt to coexist alongside changes in general social attitudes in creating exacerbations of energy vulnerability. For example, one female participant from Slough described how private landlords lacked the incentive to upgrade the building fabric to provide more adequate insulation, while tenants became increasingly reluctant to raise the issue for fear of rent rises and homelessness:

> 'Nowadays it's easier to get evicted. There's a shortage [of housing], so you dare not complain. If it's too cold you have to put up with it. You don't want to mention it.'

She also explained that with recent government austerity agendas, attitudes towards those experiencing hardship have hardened. As a result, people are now even more reluctant to seek assistance and go to greater efforts to mask their hardships:

> 'People are harder on poorer people nowadays. Very negative. The Government....they want you to feel ashamed and people are now more judging and you think they look down at you more now.....You think if I complain they will judge more, so you don't talk about it.'

However, with the growth of short-term and zero-hours employment contracts and higher risks of unemployment, people also became increasingly unable to mask their lack of ability to afford heating costs, leading to even greater risks of isolation, as noted by another participant from the same site:

> 'I asked at the job centre for emergency electricity money to get a shower before my interview. They didn't help me. You've no choice, you can't go around stinky. People think bad of you. Or you shower, you can't eat and you need food to survive. I like being clean. If I can't shower, I don't want to go out. I have my pride.'

Another participant described how changes to the demographic makeup of their rural English community led to increased isolation and feelings of shame, coupled with decreasing abilities to source out assistance via local social contacts. He explained that as increasing numbers of wealthy residents moved into rural areas, property prices increased to such an extent that many local residents were priced out of the local markets. With the decline in traditional rural employment opportunities, many local residents had little choice but to move away to seek

out employment. For those who stayed behind, being surrounded by wealth and decreasing employment opportunities and shrinkages in traditional rural social networks, led to increased social isolation and heightened awareness of their hardships. With tenancies often being tied to employment, downturns in rural industries meant that residents were reluctant to complain about low wages or poor building quality over concerns about job losses and homelessness. Statements were also made that the wealthy incomers were more likely to be unsympathetic towards poorer people. One participant stated that those who did try to show sympathy were viewed as patronising because although they tried to be sympathetic, 'they offer advice like you're a child and tell you what to do when you've tried everything before and they look at you like you must be stupid. They don't mean harm, it's more they haven't got a clue what it's like if you don't have the cash.'

The Scottish life histories illustrated how recent political movements also influenced how socio-cultural norms played out in shaping experiences of energy poverty. Participants described how the build-up to the recent independence referendum in Scotland resulted in extroversion of the normally publicly hidden dimensions of discomfort associated with living in cold homes. Several of the Scottish participants described that during this period, abilities to tolerate cold temperatures became celebrated as symbolically representative of Scottish identity. As a result, people began to speak with a sense of pride in being able to live frugally and endure the discomforts associated with cold temperatures, particularly in rural areas, as noted by a 43 year old male participant from the Scottish rural site:

> 'It seemed strange. You sort of celebrate your hardship. Show you're tough and hardy. Saying it's how a tough Highlander should be. Folk's been saying 'Where the Scotsman in you if you canna take the cold?'....Maybe you should be proud of the cold; not moan about it. Made you moan less and think worse of yourself for thinking it shouldn't be like this to be putting up with the cold because you've no money.'

While this appears rather far removed from the Scottish independence debate, it resulted in a situation whereby fuel poor households were somewhat lessened of their need to mask their situation. However, as noted above, this also created in a situation whereby local people who were struggling to cope with hardships became even more reluctant to seek help. Similarly, those not local to the area were reported as going to increased lengths to mask the visibility of their suffering for fear of contributing to local socio-political tensions through the enhancement of an 'us' verses 'them' divide.

In both the English and Scottish case study sites, participants also revealed how memories of the impacts of the privatisation of industry in local areas and the move to financial and knowledge-based economies in during previous decades resulted in creating a deeply-engrained, collectively-shared distrust of both central Government organisations and of energy companies. This was evident amongst both older and younger participants, as exemplified by a 70 year old resident from Slough:

> 'I'd find it hard to trust any Government that supports putting the interests of people in the hands of markets.....That's what left us without jobs in the first place. Now if they really cared about helping people with their bills they would do something so that people have a decent standard of living without the need for any of these sticking plaster-type remedies that they

> can use as an excuse so they don't have to do anything to sort the real causes'.

Similar attitudes were shown in Scotland, in both the rural and urban case study sites, which had been previously affected by the decline of the fishing and agricultural industries. Similar findings were also present in the English rural case study site, where the area was affected by the rise of the financial economy and the decline of the agricultural industry. This also revealed that the increased wealth brought to the Godalming area in the 1980's and 1990's did not benefit all residents within the area. Furthermore, this distrust towards National Government can be seen to help perpetuate energy poverty, as the distrust creates additional resistance to taking steps towards trying to ameliorate the situation energy through engagement with official fuel poverty alleviation schemes, such as the Home Energy Efficiency Programme for Scotland and The Affordable Warmth Scheme in England. These schemes aim to provide grants to enable householders and landlords to undertake structural improvements to properties and to provide energy saving appliances to cut down costs of fuel bills (see Scottish Government 2014 and National Energy Action 2017 for details of these schemes). However, over two thirds of participants explained that they would be extremely wary of actually taking up such an offer, citing distrust of government intentions and fears that this would result in higher future energy costs, as it would give the National UK Government no incentive to regulate the energy industry. 21 respondents were concerned as to how their personal data would be used, citing concerns about personal finances being passed to other parties. While participant concerns were based on subjective opinion rather than fact, their concerns nevertheless created a genuine reluctance to engage with these initiatives at the expense of personal warmth. For example, 8 participants in the English case study sites explained that they wouldn't trust governments to continue the scheme, believing that such schemes are brought in with the intention of providing a quick fix to a complex problem, or, as one participant put, 'to win votes and make the Government appear popular'. In Scotland, all but one participant expressed distrust concerning Government motives. Five participants were concerned that any immediate success of the scheme in reducing energy bills would provide the UK Government with the impression that the problem could be resolved without energy regulation. A total of 20 participants across all case study sites also expressed concern about becoming involved in these schemes simply because they were initiated by the Government, with Government initiatives being immediately viewed with suspicion. This was highlighted by a 23 year old participant from Fort William:

> 'When any of these things come out you think where's it coming from? When you find out it's the Government, you just know don't trust it. UK, Scottish [Government], it's always about them and not us....It's because this sort of thing's been happening for years. Things meant to help, but don't. And now people are like 'oh yeah' what they up to now? And that's everybody round here. I was brought up with it, hearing it from everybody. It's become part of the way life to second guess what's behind it if it's a Government thing'

Discussion and implications for policy development

The study highlights two key points: 1) the significance that cultural norms have in driving experiences of energy poverty in different UK settings, and 2) that these norms combine with wider processes of economic and political change to help perpetuate energy poverty. The findings also reveal that these locally-embedded cultural norms, along with distrust in central

Governments, generate barriers to engagement with policy-driven alleviation schemes. Perceptions of shame and moral failure were associated with energy poverty in all case study sites, revealing the prevalence of these perceptions throughout the UK. However, subtle differences emerged in participant perceptions of the origins of these ideas and in how they were articulated in the Scottish and English sites. Similarly, while prevailing cultural norms influence how, when and to whom participants were willing to share information about energy hardship, these were found to operate on a stronger basis among all participants in rural Scotland and amongst older participants in the other three sites. The findings also reveal how prevailing cultural norms intersect with changing economic and political geographies of place in driving local experiences of energy poverty, with changes to property prices and community demographics in the rural English case study site enhancing perceptions of shame amongst participants from this area. Changes to local industry, housing arrangements and social attitudes affected residents in both urban sites in the production of feelings of shame and self-isolating behaviour. Changes in the political landscape, from the growth of the free-market economy in the 1980's and the recent independence movement in Scotland, also impacted upon resident perceptions of shame in the respective locations.

These findings reinforce the suggestion that the drivers of energy poverty go beyond the traditional conceptualisation of energy inefficient dwellings, low incomes and high energy costs. Instead, the findings lend support to the additional importance of socio-cultural norms and meanings – particularly those related to stigma, shame and (mis)recognition (Cupples et al 2007, Day and Hitchings 2011, Hards 2013, Hitchings et al 2013, Walker and Day, 2012) – and the role that changing economic and political processes have on experiences of energy poverty within particular local contexts. They also lend support to calls to understand and examine the experience of energy poverty form the perspective of those affected by it (Anderson et al 2012, Bouzarovski et al 2013, Brunner et al 2012, Middlemiss and Gillard 2015)..

The findings have significant implications for policy-development that aims to address energy poverty, both within the UK and in the wider international context. While policy developments in the UK aim to address the issue via the material causes of hardship, greater consideration should be given to cultural stigma and norms and processes of socio-political change that may shape their uptake in specific local contexts. While the actual study findings are particular to UK local context, they suggest that while specific cultural norms may vary from place-to-place, their influence in shaping local experiences of energy poverty indicate a need for the acknowledgement and harnessing of local cultural and political geographies in developing effective, locally-responsive policy and alleviation initiatives. Possible ways that greater uptake of alleviation schemes in the UK may be achieved may therefore include moving towards more localised approaches to engagement.

Conclusion

While recent scholarship has given more attention to the significance of socio-cultural drivers in the experience and perpetuation of energy poverty, it continues to remain a relatively underexplored area. This study presents a novel contribution to this emerging body of scholarship, not only by exploring the role that cultural norms play in shaping local experiences of energy poverty in the UK, but by highlighting how such norms intersect with wider processes of economic and political change that impact upon local contexts. The findings raise considerations applicable to the wider international context as they assert the need for the acknowledgement of local cultural and political geographies of place to be

recognised and addressed within policy development. In asserting the need to move beyond traditional triadic theorisations of the drivers of energy poverty, the study lends support to theories of ‘justice as recognition’ by highlighting of how patterns of geographically-located socio-cultural norms (re)produce energy poverty within specific localities.

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